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SUBJECT: MERIDA IS APPROVED: NOW WHAT?

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Classified By: Ambassador Charles Ford, reasons 1.4 (b & d)

11. (C) Summary: Now that the Merida Initiative has been signed by the President, the embassy team has put together an update to the critical security sector needs in Honduras, the current political situation that may affect our efforts, and our recommendations for areas of focus within the Merida framework. Political will at the highest level is currently lacking and the red-hot issue of the 2009 general election will be security. In this political climate, strict USG control over programs and funding will be necessary to ensure successful outcomes. Drug trafficking is the number one security issue in Honduras. This is the opinion of the Honduran people in general, as well as our most trusted Government of Honduras (GOH) partners and our own law enforcement agencies. Closely related to drug trafficking are the problems of criminal gangs and other organized crime.

We need to develop a comprehensive plan to ensure effective and efficient use of funds. Focus should be on boosting intelligence efforts, tackling the lack of control in the prison system, providing basic criminal investigation and anti-corruption training, assisting with the professionalization of the police force, promoting cooperation between police and prosecutors, and helping civil society organizations to prevent youth violence. At the same time we must continue to work with our bilateral and multilateral partners in Honduras to ensure coordination and avoid duplication of efforts. Finally, Soto Cano is an important resource for regional intelligence, training and operations and must be a part of any serious anti-drug effort. End summary.

12. (SBU) Reftel detailed a summary of GOH equipment needs in the framework of the Merida Initiative. At the Merida Validation meeting in El Salvador on January 17-18, 2008, the GOH further coordinated its own self-evaluation and produced an updated list of requirements, with input from the Ministry of Public Security (police), Attorney General's Office, and the Honduran Armed Forces (HOAF). The list of equipment needs has not changed since then, however, the embassy team would like to provide an update on the general political and security situation in Honduras and our thoughts on how it may affect Merida implementation.

13. (C) Buy-in from each country is necessary for Merida implementation, but Honduras does not currently have the honest leadership to come up with an overall plan that will serve common interests for the region. For Merida to be successful, the USG will need to develop a specific plan for the use of funds and then get host country agreement. For example, we believe that assistance to the Ministry of Security and the Attorney General's Office on counternarcotics, money laundering, gangs, and investigation in general is a necessary step towards institution building. The Administration (both President and Ministry of Security) is at odds with the Attorney General's Office, and therefore, an effort should be made to strengthen both institutions but

with close control of the funds and programs. Oscar Alvarez, ex-Minister of Security under the former administration of Nationalist President Ricardo Maduro will perhaps get the nod as Vice-Presidential candidate and running mate of National Party leader Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo in the next elections (primaries are scheduled for November 2008 and general elections November 2009), which will put the security issue even more in the spotlight than it currently is. The fact that security will be the red-hot political theme of the campaign is all the more reason why we need to strictly control the funds.

14. (C) The embassy team identified the following as the most pressing problems that must be addressed to improve the security situation in Honduras:

(a) Drug trafficking: Of all the security issues, this is the one that poses the greatest threat to regional security and U.S. national security. From the large cities to the remote jungle areas, lawlessness is increasingly overtaking the country. Corruption continues to bring Honduras closer to the status of a narco-state. The criminal justice system is broken and there are no consequences for crimes committed if one has money and/or connections. Problems connected to drug trafficking, such as criminal gangs, money laundering, human trafficking and other organized crime, are contributing to the chaos, but the drug transit zone along the north coast consistently takes the brunt of the heat and has become more and more violent.

(b) Gangs and prisons: The prison system is fully controlled by the prisoners, more specifically gang and other organized crime leaders. Additionally, organized crime is easily organized and directed from within the prisons. There is currently political will at the level of the Minister of Security to attack this problem head on, and with INL funding we have already begun assistance in this area. Now is a good time to reinforce this program. It is also important to note that the responsibility for the prison system will most likely soon be transferred from the Ministry of Security to the Ministry of Justice. We are not sure of the extent of political will in that Ministry to tackle this difficult problem. The other side to addressing this problem is prevention. At this time GOH programs to prevent youth violence are practically non-existent.

(c) Organized crime in general: Investigation is the weakest link in the criminal justice system. Police and prosecutors do not work together and are lacking in basic criminal investigation skills. The largely inaccessible and ungoverned areas of northern and eastern Honduras are where organized crime has free reign. The Honduran police and military lack the communication equipment and training necessary to gain control over this problem.

15. (C) For an effective and efficient use of Merida funds, the embassy team suggests a focus on the following:

(a) Law enforcement: Police education and basic police training with a strong anti-corruption component; assistance in the professionalization of the police force (currently we have an INL expert acting as police academy advisor but more must be done); and strengthening the Ministry of Security's Internal Affairs unit. In June the Honduran Congress passed a new organic police reform law which is a step in the right direction towards improving the police force. One of its most important articles elevates the Internal Affairs Unit to the level of Directorate, giving it more autonomy and its own budget. The embassy team recommends that Merida money be concentrated on boosting this new Directorate. We also recommend that interdiction funds be focused on supporting combined naval-police operations along the coast. Also, the GOH already has a police intelligence unit that generally functions well, is trusted by embassy law enforcement agencies, but needs assistance in strengthening and expanding its realm of action. It was created years ago, with USG support, to specifically address drug trafficking but has taken on all forms of organized crime, including gangs.

(b) Rule of law: Basic criminal justice training with a strong anti-corruption component; programs promoting cooperation between police and prosecutors. A new draft law that will be debated by the Honduran Congress after it returns from recess on July 15 would transfer responsibility for investigating organized crime over to the Attorney General's Office and leave only the investigation of common crime with the General Directorate of Criminal Investigation (DGIC--police). The investigation function was under the authority of the Attorney General's Office until 1998 when, as a response to the lack of results, it was moved over to the Ministry of Security. After a decade of equally poor performance, lawmakers have proposed that the investigative functions be divided as described above. Embassy team believes that the investigative unit under the Ministry of Security, which comes under the political authority and manipulation of the presidency, is becoming dysfunctional. We would want to focus our funding on a new, more independent investigative unit in the Attorney General's Office.

(c) Prevention: Support to NGOs' successful programs to prevent youth violence and assistance to the community police to augment and improve their gang prevention program. Communities generally do not trust the police and it is essential to help build that trust and equip the police with the skills and materials needed to meet communities' needs. Additionally, there are several NGOs that do commendable work directly with youth, parents, and community leaders. The Zelaya Administration has made it clear through its inaction that gang prevention is low priority. Apart from the community police gang prevention unit, our recommendation is to focus the bulk of prevention efforts on assisting already well-established NGO programs.

It is important to reiterate that education and training should be a large component of our assistance: for the police, military, prosecutors and judges. This will be necessary to achieve a long-term impact. It is also necessary for us to formulate a comprehensive plan that ensures the full participation of all GOH agencies that make up the criminal justice system, as well as civil society organizations.

16. (SBU) It is important not to lose track of the work other donors are doing in the security sector. Embassy Tegucigalpa conducted an assessment of our partners' programs and is in frequent communication with them to coordinate efforts and avoid duplication. This saves resources, strengthens projects and sends a strong message to the GOH that we have shared goals. We must continue to work closely with our colleagues from bilateral and multilateral missions in the framework of Merida. Finally, the potential of Soto Cano Air Force Base as a facility for regional intelligence, training and operations must not be overlooked, both for police and military, for any serious anti-drug effort in Honduras.

FORD